

Uniform Statistical Reporting System

# 1996 Client Baseline Study



## Data Collection Methods

As of February 1, 2000, the Statewide Office of Family Court Services has merged with the Center for Children and the Courts to become the Center for Families, Children & the Courts

Statewide Office of Family Court Services  
Judicial Council of California  
Administrative Office of the Courts

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# Uniform Statistical Reporting System Acknowledgments

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# **1996 Client Baseline Study**

## **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

**T**he 1996 Client Baseline Study is a representative cross-section of parents using family court services across the state. Like its 1991 and 1993 predecessors, the 1996 Client Baseline Study offers reliable statistics about the utility of family court services and documents the prevailing experiences of clients in court-based resolution of disputes about child custody and visitation. The 1996 study was designed to continue to chart trends and changes since 1991 and to address questions raised in light of persisting budget constraints, rising caseloads, and changes in law and court procedures.

The 1996 Client Baseline Study is part of a program of research that fulfills the Statewide Office of Family Court Services' mandate to provide uniform statewide statistics that advise family law policy.<sup>1</sup> Entitled The Uniform Statistical Reporting System (USRS), the program's mission is to provide rigorous statistics on issues facing policymakers, judges, attorneys, court personnel, researchers, special-interest groups, and parents who use the family courts. The USRS follows a parsimonious design, consisting of a network of discrete but interlocking studies that can be used alone or in various combinations to address specific policy questions.

To ensure that the research program addresses pressing needs for information with a high rate of client input, the Statewide Office employs a collaborative research model. Research questions are identified in consultation with policy leaders, service providers, and parents who use family court services across the state. Data collection methods that facilitate client participation on a confidential basis are developed in site visits and in consultation with individual court mediation service providers. Primary responsibility for the scientific merit, administration, and analysis of the findings rests with the Statewide Office.

### **Study Design and Content**

The Family Court Services Client Baseline Studies are designed to collect information about all clients using family court services across the state within the designated time period of the research. Mediation of child-custody and visitation issues is the service provided most often, however, the various courts offer a wide range of family court services, meeting diverse needs throughout the state. In addition to child-custody

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<sup>1</sup>Under Family Code sections 1850–1852, the California Statewide Office of Family Court Services is mandated to (1) assist counties in implementing mediation and conciliation proceedings; (2) administer a program of grants for research, study, and demonstration projects in the area of family law; (3) administer a program for the training of court personnel involved in family law proceedings; (4) establish and implement a uniform statistical reporting system; and (5) conduct research on the effectiveness of current family law for the purpose of shaping future public policy.

mediation, the 1996 Client Baseline Study collected data about focused child-custody evaluations and investigations,<sup>2</sup> comprehensive child-custody evaluations and investigations, and guardianships. Premarital counseling, stepparent adoption, dependency mediation, counseling on other family matters, and other family court services were counted, but no other information about those services was gathered. Other new data collection topics for the 1996 study were parent education/orientation classes and the service providers themselves. The two-week period from September 30 through October 11, 1996, was designated as the study period.

Chart 1 summarizes the design and content of the 1996 Client Baseline Study. The client questionnaires were available in both English and Spanish.

For **child-custody mediation sessions**, three questionnaires were administered:

- The *Client Profile* was completed by each parent before the session. This questionnaire covered the family's current situation, issues each person was bringing to the session, and parent and child demographics.
- Immediately after the custody mediation session, each parent was asked to complete a *Parent Viewpoint—Mediation Session* questionnaire, which was returned in a sealed envelope addressed to the Statewide Office. This form gave parents the opportunity to evaluate the mediation process, their particular mediator, and the session just completed. To permit comparisons over time, the 1996 *Parent Viewpoint* repeated many of the questions included on the 1991 and 1993 forms. These asked for feedback about the helpfulness of the mediation process and whether issues were given a fair hearing, as well as general satisfaction with the process and the outcome of mediation. Items added in the 1996 Client Baseline Study focused on areas of discomfort with the process as well as perceptions of respectful and fair treatment of clients.
- The *Counselor Report*, which described the process and outcome of the session, was completed by the counselor after each session.

For **focused investigation and evaluations** (FIE, a form of expedited evaluation) the same *Client Profile* and *Counselor Report* were used and the same research procedures were followed. The exit questionnaire, *Parent Viewpoint—FIE*, given to each parent to complete after the session, differed from the mediation version only in that three items deemed inappropriate for the circumstances were omitted.

For **comprehensive investigations and evaluations**, no client forms were used because, unlike the previously named services, clients were not likely to be in the family court services' offices on the day when the counselors filled out their questionnaires. For each investigation and evaluation completed by family court services staff in the two-week study period, the counselor was asked to fill out an *Investigation/Evaluation Report* describing the process, outcomes, and recommendations, and providing some information

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<sup>2</sup>This label covered a variety of fairly new services offered in many family courts. These include emergency screenings, ex parte screenings, brief assessments, fast-track evaluations, ASAP screenings, mini-evaluations, and expedited investigations. The term was meant to distinguish these services from the more traditional comprehensive child-custody investigation and evaluation.

about the family. A case was considered completed when the counselor submitted the report. The report's completion during the two-week study period was used as the criterion for including the case in the study because only at that point could the counselor provide complete information about the case.

For **guardianship investigations** completed in the two-week study period by staff considered part of family court services, the counselor filled out a *Counselor Report—Guardianship* describing the case, process, outcomes, and recommendations. As in the comprehensive investigations and evaluations, and for the same reasons, a case was considered completed when the counselor submitted the report. No client forms were used because guardianship clients were not likely to be in the offices on the same day the report was completed.

If a **guardianship mediation** took place, clients were on site and were asked to fill out a *Client Viewpoint—Guardianship*, a survey of the client's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the mediator, the process, and the outcome.

For **parent education or orientation classes** held during the study period, a one-page questionnaire, *Parent Education/Orientation Feedback*, was distributed for clients' evaluation of the session.

For the first time as part of the statewide data collection, all direct providers of family court services across the state were asked to fill out a brief questionnaire, *Counselor Registration Form*, indicating their gender, ethnicity, experience, and years of service, and describing their perception of changes in family courts during their tenures.

Family Court Services directors in each superior court completed the *Summary of Services Questionnaire*, an inventory of services currently provided in their courts as well as a tally of services actually provided within the data collection period. This count made it possible to calculate the percentage of cases for which research data was provided.

### **Coverage and Representativeness**

Chart 1 shows the percentage of study participants who completed each form. For child custody and visitation mediation sessions, the counselor filled out a *Counselor Report* for each family in the sample. Eighty-nine percent of the mediating parents filled out the *Client Profile*. In the 1996 Client Baseline Study, as in the earlier data collections, almost equal percentages of mothers and fathers provided data and about 4 percent used a Spanish language questionnaire (199 in 1996). The *Parent Viewpoint* was completed by 70 percent of the mediating mothers and fathers; a slightly larger number of mothers than fathers filled out the exit form (51 percent were mothers).

Among the parents participating in focused investigation/evaluation sessions, 86 percent completed the *Client Profile*; equal numbers of mothers and fathers filled out the questionnaire. The *Parent Viewpoint* was completed by only a quarter of the parents. We collected the same kinds of data about these sessions as we did about mediation sessions

because the structure of the way the service is provided is similar, that is, clients came into the office to meet with counselors. However, FI/Es are more like evaluations in the nature of the kinds of problems addressed and the level of distress parents may be experiencing. For this reason the low response rate for the *Parent Viewpoint FI/E* is not surprising.

The 1996 Baseline Study collected information about 81 percent of the comprehensive evaluations and 69 percent of the guardianship investigations completed during the study period.

**CHART 1**  
**1996 Client Baseline Study**  
**Design and Content**

**Child-Custody and Visitation Mediation Sessions and Focused  
Investigation/Evaluation Sessions**

Questionnaire:	<i>Client Profile</i>	<i>Counselor Report</i>	<i>Parent Viewpoint</i>
Completed by:	Each mediation client	Counselor or mediator	Mothers and fathers who participated in session
When completed:	Pre-session	Post-session	Post-session
Percent completed:	Mediations: 89% FI/E sessions: 86%	Mediation: 100% FI/E sessions: 100%	Mediations: 70% FI/E sessions: 25%
Contents:	Demographic profile of parents, children  De facto parenting arrangements  Children's problems  Presenting issues  Interparental relationship/conflict  Coparenting issues	Background of case  Parties present  Special procedures  Allegations  Issues covered  Status of case before and after session  Agreements made  Special provisions  Description of session	Helpfulness of service  Opportunity to discuss issues  Satisfaction with process  Perception of fairness and respect shown by mediator  Satisfaction with and evaluation of results

**(CHART 1 Continued)**  
**Other Services**

Questionnaire:	<i><b>Investigation/Evaluation Report</b></i>	<i><b>Counselor Report -- Guardianship</b></i>	<i><b>Parent Education/Orientation Feedback</b></i>
Completed by:	Evaluator/Counselor	Investigator/counselor	Parents
When completed:	When case completed, report submitted.	When case completed, report submitted <b>OR</b> for Guardianship Mediations, after mediation session.	Immediately after attending parent education/orientation session
Percent completed:	81%	69%	Number = 653
Contents:	Background of case	Background of case	Structure of session
	Children's demographics	Parties involved	Content of session
	Allegations	Children's demographics	Overall helpfulness of session
	Issues considered	Allegations	Most helpful topic areas
	Child issues	Child issues	Topic suggestions
	Recommendations	Scope of investigation	
	Special provisions	Recommendations	
	Scope of evaluation / investigation	Special provisions	
	Assessment of case and parents		

The discussion about Chart 1 centered on the completion rates for the instruments (that is, what proportion of all clients participating in sessions also filled out the questionnaires). A completion rate for the *Parent Education/Orientation Feedback* could not be provided because there was no information on the number of people participating in sessions during the study period.

The broader issue of coverage is how well the sessions included in the research represent family court service sessions throughout the state. The 1991 and 1993 Client Baseline Studies were able to provide sound statistics and prevalence data for court-based mediation throughout the state because each of those samples was a representative cross-

section of court mediation sessions. The information summarized in Chart 2 indicates that for court-based child custody and visitation mediation, the 1996 Client Baseline Study sample is, again, a representative cross-section of California court-based mediation sessions.

**CHART 2**  
**1996 Client Baseline Study**  
**September 30 - October 11, 1996**  
**Completion Rates**

<b>SERVICE</b>	<b>Total Number Statewide</b>	<b>Number Included In Study</b>	<b>Percent Included</b>
Child-custody and visitation mediation sessions	3,253	2,588	80%
Focused investigation/evaluation sessions	257	113	44%
Comprehensive investigation/evaluations	78	63	81%
Guardianship investigations	65	45	69%
Parent education/orientation feedback		653	
All other Family Court Services	342		
Total number Family Court Services during study period	3,995		
<p>Number of California counties participating in study                      54 out of 58*</p> <p>Child-Custody and Visitation Mediation sample:</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Families represented    2,588</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Mothers                      2,227</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Fathers                        2,157</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Children                     4,114</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Families with data from mother and father    1,986</p> <p>*Three counties do not have court-based mediation: Alpine, Inyo, Mono. Only one county with court-based mediation, Colusa, was unable to participate in this study.</p>			

The objective of the 1996 Client Baseline Study was to include all families who used family court services in the state of California during the study period, September 30 through October 11, 1996. The study covered 54 of the 55 California counties with court-based mediation (3 of California's 58 counties do not have court-based mediation). Information was gathered on 2,809 families seen by court-based mediators and counselors for mediation, focused investigation/evaluation, comprehensive investigation/evaluation, and guardianship investigation during that period. Overall, that number represents 77 percent of all families seen for these services. Extensive information was collected about 2,588 families participating in court-based custody mediation during the study period, 80 percent of all families in court mediation throughout the state. The study included 81



percent of the 78 comprehensive investigation/evaluations completed by Family Court Services staff, but only 40 percent of the focused investigation/evaluation sessions and 69 percent of the guardianship investigations, that took place during the two-week period.

The completion rates for child custody mediation and comprehensive evaluations surpass the accepted standards of survey research in defining a sample that can be used to establish reliable statistics and prevalence data for a population. The completion rate for guardianship investigations is within the range of acceptability and the FI/E completion rate is well below the standard. This was the first baseline study to attempt to include the FI/E families and guardianship investigations and it is clear that the methodology for those services needs to be reconsidered.

Court-based child-custody and visitation mediation is the major focus of the Client Baseline Study because it is the service provided most often by family court services. The 1996 Client Baseline Study along with the 1991 and 1993 Client Baseline Studies offer the best existing data, and the most representative and comprehensive data, about court-based mediation in California.